

*Manet, Flaubert, and the
Emergence of Modernism
Blurring Genre Boundaries*

ARDEN REED

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Framing Manet and Flaubert

This book is about the relationship between image and text, and about certain origins of modernism. It argues that these two topics are not independent, as they might appear, but rather intertwined. Two nineteenth-century artists who are generally regarded as “the first modern painter” and “the first modern writer” – namely, Édouard Manet and Gustave Flaubert – define the field of inquiry.

A double question animates my study. First, can examining the way we “read” an image in a (representational) painting or read an “image” in a (realistic) work of fiction teach us something about each medium? Literature, it is traditionally held, aims to appropriate the vividness and immediacy of painting, while painting strives to replicate literature’s power to depict actions, emotions, and ideas. This old aesthetic saw masks an unsettling implication: that a certain gap might appear in one cultural form, like a text, so that it invokes another form, like a painting, to supplement or authorize itself. Second question: What happens to the relationship between image and text when they undergo identity crises? Specifically, how does the advent of modernism inflect the relationship between literature and painting? But we shall see that this question also reads backward: How do changing image–text relations themselves contribute to producing modernism?

I

By its very organization, this book contests what remains the most influential account we possess about the beginnings of modernism, namely, that of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg takes issue with the aesthetic doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*, which, according to its classical formulation by Horace, prescribes that each art imitate the other. Fully conscious of this tradition, Greenberg argues that modernism happens when both painting and literature expel any trace of the other. The two arts are obliged to separate – to attain “purity,” a recurring and telling word – in order for each to explore its own character.

Each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself. . . . The task . . . became to eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered “pure,” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.¹

For painting this means, above all, purging “the literary”: “modernist painting asks that a literary theme be translated into strictly optical, two-dimensional terms before becoming the subject of pictorial art – which means its being translated in such a way that it entirely loses its literary character.”² For Greenberg the pursuit of “purity” begins with Manet, who became the first modern painter by “exterminating” “literature” from painting, since “literature” had to die for optical modernism to be born.³ (Flaubert’s version of this story is noted in a moment.)

Greenberg was a complex enough writer to sustain various readings,⁴ and over time even he changed his mind about “purity.”⁵ For my purposes, however, it suffices to invoke the iconic Greenberg, whose thesis that modernism entails a separation of the arts remains consistent enough that in the paragraph above I could move easily between “Towards a Newer Laocoon” and “Modernist Painting,” two essays written twenty or twenty-five years apart. We should note that, in order to tell the story of modernist painting, Greenberg himself found it necessary to refer to literature. From the mid-seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth, he says, literature so dominated European culture that painting gradually succumbed to the “temptation to emulate” literature⁶ and thereby largely failed to exploit the resources of its own medium. But Greenberg let literature drop out of the picture too quickly, for – although their relationship changes significantly from earlier periods – neither can modernist painting be understood apart from literature. Pierre Bourdieu offers the necessary corrective to Greenberg by arguing that one cannot follow the development of modern painting and literature so long as one separates the two arts. To read the “invention” of the modern writer and artist (and Bourdieu has Flaubert and Manet specifically in mind), he insists, “one has to go beyond the limits imposed by the division of specialties and abilities. The essential remains unintelligible as long as one remains enclosed within the limits of a single literary or artistic tradition.”⁷ It is this invitation that my book takes up.

Greenberg was neither the first to argue for “purity,” nor the first to make Manet the star.⁸ That argument already governs the critic and novelist Émile Zola’s reply to the painter’s hostile reviews. In 1866, Zola evacuated from Manet’s canvases everything but strictly visual experience: “we must judge him neither as a moralist nor as a man of letters [*littérateur*]; we must judge him as a painter. . . . He does not know how to sing or philosophize. He knows how to paint and that is all.”⁹ To be a *peintre* means precisely not to be a *littérateur*; the one excludes

the other.¹⁰ On these grounds Zola replied to the charges that *Olympia*, shown at the Salon of 1865, is obscene: “you wanted bright, luminous patches, and you placed a bouquet; you wanted black patches, and you added in a corner a Negress and a black cat. What does all this mean? You hardly know, nor do I.”¹¹ Hence there is nothing scandalous about the painting. Zola’s most important twentieth-century descendent besides Greenberg is Georges Bataille, who wrote a 1955 study entitled *Manet*. One chapter, “The Destruction of the Subject,” declares: “what Manet insisted upon, uncompromisingly, was an end to rhetoric in painting. What he insisted upon was that painting should rise in utter freedom, in *natural* silence, painting for its own sake, a song for the eyes of interwoven forms and colors.”¹² Such silence, I think, is anything but “natural” (the oxymoron “silent song” is the tip-off); in fact, “silence” is a coded reference meant to disparage pictures that talk or tell stories – even though Bataille’s own version of Manet’s painting is implicitly textual: “interwoven forms and colors.” Their vast differences notwithstanding, Bataille agrees with Greenberg in insisting that painting free itself by negating the subject: “To suppress and destroy the subject is exactly what modern painting does, but this does not mean that the subject is altogether absent. To some extent every picture has its subject, its title, but now these have shrunk to insignificance; they are mere *pretexts* for the painting itself.”¹³ As it happens, this formula – “the pretext” (which Bataille underscores and, mantralike, invokes thrice)¹⁴ – comes directly out of a Zola essay on Manet: For true painters “the subject . . . is only a pretext [*prétexte*] for painting, while for the crowd there is nothing but the subject.”¹⁵

If Zola, Bataille, and Greenberg made Manet a formalist, Flaubert did not have to await such critics, but represented himself sometimes in similar terms. The best-known instance is an 1852 letter written as he worked on *Madame Bovary*.

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible.¹⁶

Because the referential character of language makes it impossible to write a book about nothing, strictly speaking, Flaubert chose a plot so hackneyed that the reader would lose interest in subject matter and focus on formal structures – thereby “exterminating” the novel’s subject matter. Or so the story goes. This reading of Flaubert is not wrong – it has produced important criticism of his work – but it lacks nuance.¹⁷ Cracks begin to appear in the formalist façade as soon as we attach another of the writer’s famous remarks: “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi.*”

* * *

Ut pictura poesis, the idea that literature should make us see and painting should tell a story, sounds innocent enough. But the very concepts of image and text are ideologically charged with associations that reach beyond the material or aesthetic character of literature and painting. In fact, *ut pictura poesis* stands out against an even older tradition that sets word and image at odds and locked in a power struggle. Words are associated with culture because they are arbitrary signs, a human product, and “introduc[e] unnatural elements into the world – time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation.”¹⁸ By contrast, images appear to be natural, since they resemble what they represent. Hence images are associated with the material or the bodily and words with the mental or the spiritual. Further, words are marked as masculine (Adam naming the animals) and images as feminine (Eve watching her reflection in the pool). According to myth, the art of painting originated when a Corinthian woman named Dibutade traced on the wall the shadow of her departing lover. So pervasive is this ideology that, despite his markedly historicizing ways, W. J. T. Mitchell declares “the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. . . . The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs. . . .”¹⁹

From the seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth, according to Mitchell, words were generally understood as the offspring of visual images. In conformity with this “pictorial theory of language,” words refer to mental images that experience has impressed on the mind’s *tabula rasa* because ideas themselves are already images.²⁰ Today, of course, the arrow has largely reversed directions, and semiotics has made it a commonplace to treat visual images as a kind of language.²¹ We might wonder how a picture can tell a story the way a text does, since narrative is sequential while painting is stationary, but that turns out to be a pseudoproblem, rooted in the historical development of painting. It was only the Renaissance discovery of single-point perspective that led painters to restrict themselves to representing a single moment in time.²² Until Alberti, painting was practiced as a storytelling art, and a single panel [see Plate I] often represented multiple episodes in someone’s life. Indeed, “by the end of the Middle Ages, the noun *historia* and its Italian equivalents *storia* and *istoria* had taken on, as a secondary denotation, the meaning ‘pictorial representation.’”²³ And despite Renaissance strictures, the storytelling potential of painting never really vanished, as renewed interest in contemporary narrative painting and video attest.

I want to expand or liberate what we ordinarily mean by *ut pictura poesis*, so that painting and literature may be freed of the instruction narrowly to parrot each other, freed to enter into a range of intimate if not incestuous relations, such that one medium articulates its project with reference to the other.²⁴ Against Greenberg, Bataille, Zola, and company, I argue that in modernist painting “lit-

erary character” and a focus on medium or form do not exclude each other – any more than does “painterly character” in modernist fiction. On the contrary, to the extent that Flaubert and Manet are implicated in its beginnings, modernism happens, in part at least, when painting and literature *interfere* with each other.²⁵ Manet sometimes appropriates the kind of narrative elements that Flaubert eschews, and Flaubert may paint lucid verbal descriptions of the sort that critics accused Manet of managing ineptly on canvas. Greenberg is right about modernism exploring the medium of each art, but he fails to see how Manet and Flaubert both expose the character of their respective media precisely by engaging each with the other’s.

It follows that neither artist dismisses “subject matter” nor regards it, à la Greenberg, as a distraction or an embarrassment.²⁶ Instead, as we shall see, Flaubert and Manet (often perversely) exploit the opportunities that subject matter presents.²⁷ Their position accords with Charles Baudelaire’s remark in another key modernist text, the “Salon of 1859”: “I can never regard choice of subject as indifferent. . . . I hold that subject-matter plays a part in the artist’s genius, just as it plays a part in my own pleasure – barbarian as I am!”²⁸ Manet and Flaubert likewise bear out Baudelaire’s assertion in “The Painter of Modern Life” that the mixing of genres is distinctly modern: “the genius of the painter of manners is of a mixed nature, by which I mean that it contains a strong literary element. . . . Sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment.”²⁹

One step remains to the argument. By making painting and literature interdependent, Manet and Flaubert create no seamless union or amalgamation but bring likeness and difference into relief, and thereby alert us to the specificity of each. Rather than following Horace, they both render ungracious the relationship between painting and literature, and revisit the tradition of the sister arts in order to stir family conflicts. Flaubert, for example, once proposed to “illustrate” an edition of a story in order to perplex his readers by the ill fit that would result between image and text. Similarly, in his *The Dead Christ and the Angels* Manet introduced text into image by inserting a textual reference to the Gospel according to Saint John (“chapter 20, verse 12”) – but a reference that is actually at variance with the scene he painted, and so creates a gap between image and text comparable to Flaubert’s [Fig. 1].³⁰ Flaubert’s and Manet’s mutual stake in word–image relations is historically significant in transforming *ut pictura poesis* from a figure of harmony to one of dissonance. In a word, Flaubert and Manet produce modernism by troping *ut pictura poesis*. And by introducing dissonance, they inaugurate a rich tradition of experimental mixings and juxtapositions.

II

Flaubert's and Manet's careers overlap neatly and fall squarely in the "society of the spectacle" and the cultural milieu of decadence.³¹ Both men came from sober, comfortable, professional households, and both liked to *épater* their class while retaining its privileges. (Each ran afoul of the law.)³² As *haut bourgeois* artists and elegant men of the world they naturally shared acquaintances, including Baudelaire, Zola, Théophile Gautier, and the Goncourt brothers. Perhaps their paths even crossed at the café Tortoni's on one of Flaubert's extended sojourns in the capital. But as far as anybody knows they had no direct connection. Their closest approaches: In 1874 Manet requested tickets for the opening of Flaubert's play *The Candidate*, and the painter's name appeared in Flaubert's enormous correspondence only once. Thanking Zola for a volume of his art criticism, Flaubert wrote, "As to Manet, since I don't understand a thing about his painting, I can't judge what you say about him."³³ Should we take Flaubert at his word? To say "I don't understand his painting" may have simply been a way to short-circuit a debate with Zola. But ironic or not, Flaubert's remark presupposes that (a) he has seen Manet's paintings, (b) he has seen not only one of them but enough of them to generalize, and (c) he has tried to understand and presumably failed. The question is whether Flaubert's apparent blindness results from being too far away from Manet or too close. And if Flaubert is serious, was Manet's project perhaps a little bit too self-evident for the novelist to see? In any case, the surprising failure of these two notorious, avant-garde artists to interact actually proves liberating for us, because if their lives had meshed significantly, we would be tempted to circumscribe the matter within the realm of biography. The absence of concrete ties, by contrast, frees their relationship to be open-ended.

I am not the first to draw Manet and Flaubert together. Their association dates at least from the 1880s, when Zola based a painter in his novel *The Masterpiece* on an amalgam of Flaubert and Manet.³⁴ Since then, several important critics have suggested links between the two artists, including Charles Bernheimer, Pierre Bourdieu, Peter Brooks, T. J. Clark, Michael Fried, Françoise Cachin, Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, Linda Nochlin, and even Marcel Proust.³⁵ Of these comparisons the best-known is Michel Foucault's:

Déjeuner sur l'herbe and *Olympia* were perhaps the first "museum" paintings, the first paintings in European art that were less a response to the achievement of Giorgione, Raphael, and Velázquez than an acknowledgement . . . of the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums. In the same period, *The Temptation [of Saint Antony]* was the first literary work to comprehend the greenish institutions where books are accumulated and where the slow and incontrovertible vegetation of learning quietly proliferates. Flaubert is to the library



1. Édouard Manet, *The Dead Christ and the Angels*, 1864 (*detail*). Oil on canvas, 70 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 59 in. (179.4 \times 149.9 cm) (in full). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.51).

what Manet is to the museum. . . . [They both] unearth an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing.”³⁶

However, Foucault’s neo-Greenbergian sketch overlooks one relevant detail: that Manet and Flaubert did not remain within their respective institutions but wandered through each other’s halls. It is as though their two structures connected or communicated, so that Flaubert could “manifest the existence of museums” and Manet that of libraries.³⁷ None of these critics extends his or her aperçu to a full comparison mounted here, however; and then, my own interest took a different turn because I sensed that Manet and Flaubert could exemplify the relation of modernist image to text.

It is no coincidence – indeed it is hard to overstate the significance – that the very “fathers of modernism” also haunted the borders between image and text. (As artists who made clichés into modern art, Flaubert and Manet would not fail to remark the irony of my recycling the paternity cliché.) This study “reads” Manet’s paintings as if they were texts and reads Flaubert’s texts as if they were painting galleries – in a manner that pastiches two masters of the art of pastiche. (Manet, we know, dreamed of a literary career,³⁸ and Flaubert considered becoming a painter.³⁹) I propose that Manet does not simply signify “Image” nor Flaubert simply “Text”; rather, the opposition already occurs in a sense *within* their works – the tensions between word and image play themselves out *in the interior* both of Manet’s paintings and of Flaubert’s fictions. Such a reading leads us to question the received ways we have come to understand both artists.

The ensuing chapters frame passages of intermingling, where Flaubert's fiction comes to look painterly and Manet's painting assumes a textual quality. We need a name for these sites, and I call them "graphic moments," from the Greek *graphein*, which means both to write and to paint.⁴⁰ At such moments the two kinds of sign overlap or merge, so that seeing and reading become hard to separate. Graphic moments hardly begin with modernism; they include the mark of Cain or the scar of Odysseus, Egyptian hieroglyphics, certain Chinese characters, narrative stained-glass windows, literary critical terms like "figure," "passage," "line," or "character." To some of these we shall return, but by way of introduction let me offer an exemplary graphic moment from the passage in Edgar Allan Poe's "Purloined Letter" where Dupin describes a puzzle played upon a map:

One party playing requires another to find a given word – the name of town, river, state or empire – any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious. . . .⁴¹

A map is a site where image and text overlap and mix – neither one makes much sense in the absence of the other, and Poe redoubles the effect by penning an *ekphrasis*, a "word picture" of that visual picture – writing so that we may see. Dupin's game entails both seeing and reading those "motley" signs whose mixture "perplexes" the object of sight. The game exploits a paradox of vision whereby the most visible may turn invisible. And this paradox depends on the play of distance and proximity – which, as it happens, is a phenomenon Manet and Flaubert both invoke and that will consequently catch up my own readings. In Poe's illustration, increasing the size of the letters not only makes them "a little bit too self evident"; it also turns them from text into broken bits of image. A huge "C" or "O" or "I" morphs into a stray graphic mark cutting across some geographic feature delineated on the map. Poe ends this episode by enlarging the letters still further, from the map to the sign in the street, and so extends the game and the paradox of graphic moments to the world at large.

III

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*.

Joseph Conrad

What does it mean for me to call a painter "literary"? For one thing, Manet was intimately connected with several important writers of his day – Baudelaire, Zola, and Mallarmé – and the subject of critical studies by Zola, Mal-



2. Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877 (*detail*). Oil on canvas, 150 × 116 cm (59 × 46 in.) (in full). Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany. Copyright © Foto Marburg / Art Resource, NY.

larmé, Valéry, Malraux, and Bataille.⁴² He was fictionalized by Baudelaire, Zola, the Goncourts, and Proust, among others. Manet illustrated a number of texts,⁴³ and poets composed verses to accompany his pictures.⁴⁴ The weight of all this commerce suggests a certain resonance beyond the circumstantial between Manet and these writers. More significantly, Manet's "literariness" follows from – or else helps to explain – his relationship to the history of painting. Michael Fried demonstrated at length "the literalness and obviousness with which [Manet] often quoted earlier paintings."⁴⁵ In borrowing the language of literary criticism – Manet "quotes" or "alludes to" Velázquez, say – art historians are in fact proposing a kind of intertextuality. In *Fishing* (1861–3), for example, Manet "cites" Annibale Carracci and Rubens in the way that a later poet may cite earlier ones, at once recalling the antecedent "figure" and revising it. Furthermore, Manet sometimes puns across the visual-verbal divide, as with the wallpaper crane in *Nana*, the *grue* that is also the French term for a high-class prostitute, like the woman portrayed [Fig. 2].⁴⁶ At such moments, seeing Manet also means reading him.

Indeed, Manet's very method of applying paint to canvas displays linguistic affinities. In an essay called "Manet's Pictorial Language," Anne Coffin Hanson observes that the painter "developed a remarkable system of marks or signs to express what he saw. . . . In just those areas (an arm, a face, a torso) that seem to lack volume because they lack shading, painted marks describe the turning surfaces."⁴⁷ Hanson's is not just a conventional way of speaking, for it reiterates Manet's own way of characterizing his work, as when he said "without punctuation there can be neither spelling nor grammar," just as "attempting to separate drawing from color is absurd."⁴⁸ (Correspondingly, Flaubert said, "Here are two mediocrities in the same milieu, and I must differentiate between them. If I bring it off, it will be a great achievement, I think, for it will be like painting in monotone without contrasts – not easy.")⁴⁹



3. Édouard Manet, *Mme. Manet and Her Son at Arcachon*, 1871. Drawing (study for *Interior at Arcachon*, 1871). Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. Bequest of William G. Russell Allen. Photograph: Allan Macintyre. Copyright © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



4. Édouard Manet, *Plum Brandy (Woman with a Plum)*, ca. 1877. Oil on canvas, 0.736 × 0.502 m (29 × 19 ¾ in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon. Photograph copyright © 2001 Board of Trustees.



5. Édouard Manet, *The Railway* (*Gare Saint-Lazare*; aka *Chemin de fer*), 1873. Oil on canvas, 0.933 × 1.115 m (36¾ × 45⅛ in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his mother Louisine W. Havemeyer. Photograph copyright © 2001 Board of Trustees.

Finally, Manet is “literary” because his painting displays a complex relation to narrative. Although he ridiculed history painting,⁵⁰ he nonetheless composed several of them, including multiple large-scale versions of the *Execution of Maximilian* (1867), as well as oil paintings of *Battle of the Kearsarge and the Alabama* (1864) and *The Escape of Rochefort* (1880–1), and a watercolor drawing of *The Barricade* (1871?). However, I am less interested in these self-proclaiming histories than in paintings where Manet hinted at narrative situations, a category that includes some of his most characteristic works – *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* [see Fig. 38], *Olympia* [see Fig. 39], *Interior at Arcachon* [study, Fig. 3], *Masked Ball at the Opéra* (1873–4), *Plum Brandy* [Fig. 4], *The Railway* [Fig. 5], *In the Conservatory* [see Fig. 31], *At Father Lathuille’s* [see Fig. 32], and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* [detail, Plate IV]. Such pictures reveal his pleasure in playing narrative games, a pleasure that may exceed his desire to tweak the bourgeoisie. À la Poe, Manet delights in puzzles or mysteries, while his tone is cool and urbane – closer to Flaubert’s.

* * *

When you write . . . you compose visible pictures to yourself.
 Flaubert, 1836⁵¹

At first glance, there appears to be no corresponding painterly aspect to Flaubert's texts. Unlike Dickens, say, Flaubert insisted that his works never be illustrated,⁵² and he was explicitly hostile to mixing genres. Sounding like Greenberg *avant la lettre* he exclaimed, "the explanation of one artistic form by another is a monstrosity. You won't find in all the museums of the world a good picture that needs a commentary. Look at the exhibition catalogues. The longer the entry, the worse the painting."⁵³ But I submit that Flaubert hated illustrations not simply as an aid to lazy readers or because they trespass on a writer's territory.⁵⁴ Rather, such visual aids were redundant, because Flaubert is a strikingly visual writer – as some of his best readers (Proust or Lukács) have remarked.⁵⁵ Not simply his visual but his painterly side in particular was evident from the start, so that at the trial of *Madame Bovary* the prosecuting attorney claimed that Flaubert produced "realistic painting" composed of "lascivious tableaux" and "lascivious color."⁵⁶ And three years later, a critic complained that Flaubert's imagination "enclos[ed] itself in the material world as if in a vast studio peopled with models who in his eyes all have the same value."⁵⁷ The observation echoes down to our own day: "Flaubert tends both to see and to describe people, objects and landscapes *as if* they were paintings" says the author of a study of Flaubert and painting, seconded by Peter Brooks remarking of Flaubert's "composition" that "the painterly analogy is forced on us."⁵⁸ At least two of his works are based explicitly on pictures, and they span his career – *The Temptation of Saint Antony* (a novel he wrote and rewrote from 1848 to 1872)⁵⁹ and "The Legend of Saint Julien" (1875).⁶⁰ The genesis of *Saint Antony* dates from 1845, when Flaubert (accompanying his sister on her honeymoon) visited the Balbi Palace in Genoa. On seeing a *Temptation of Saint Antony* that had been attributed to Peter Brueghel the Younger, Flaubert at once decided to turn it into a novel.⁶¹

That the writer is not casually recycling the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* is demonstrated by an 1867 letter to Hippolyte Taine. Taine had asked four men (Flaubert, the painter Gustave Doré, a chess player, and a mathematician) how they understood "imagination and images." Flaubert's reply establishes a vivid connection between writing and visual images. "There are many details that I do not write down. Thus, M. Homais as I see him is slightly pitted by smallpox. In the passage I am writing just now I *see* an entire set of furniture (including the stains on certain of the pieces): not a word will be said about all this."⁶² Ten years later, in the midst of *Three Tales*, he said "now that I have finished *Félicité* [i.e., "A Simple Heart"], *Hérodiade* appears and I *see* (clearly, just as I *see* the Seine) the surface of the Red Sea glistening in the sun. Herod and his wife are on a balcony from which are visible the golden roof tiles of the temple."⁶³ That emphasis on the verb "to see" punctuates some of Flaubert's key statements on art, like his

definitions of genius: “the ability to *see*, to have the model posing there before you,” or of style: “in itself . . . an absolute manner of seeing things.”⁶⁴

As a result, Flaubert’s fiction is veined with visual references. In *Madame Bovary* pictures occupy every social space, from La Vaubyessard, where the dark wall paneling is lined with portraits in gilded frames;⁶⁵ to the church at Yonville with its copyist’s painting of the Holy Family “Presented by the Minister of the Interior” (86); to the cottage of Mme. Rollet, the wet nurse (“a figure of Fame blowing her trumpets – a picture probably cut out of a perfume advertisement and now fastened to the wall with six shoe tacks” [110]); to Justin’s illustrated copy of *Conjugal Love* (295). Emma draws (18, 48); Léon does watercolors (102). She insists on exchanging miniatures with Rodolphe (199), and dresses Léon in black to make him resemble portraits of Louis XIII (327). In *Sentimental Education* we first see Frédéric Moreau holding a sketchbook, and later he toys with the idea of becoming a painter; also, M. Arnoux’s business – “L’Art industriel, boulevard Montmartre” – “was a hybrid establishment, comprising both an art magazine and a picture shop.”⁶⁶ But the painterly is not confined to isolated passages; in fact, it becomes a principle of Flaubert’s composition. His drafts repeatedly direct the writer to paint. For the opening of “A Simple Heart,” for example, Flaubert plans “*the portrait of Félicité*”⁶⁷ [the heroine]; for the card party, he must “*paint an old maid by a stroke of her figure or dress*”;⁶⁸ for Félicité, “Paint her thus, in her kitchen, while Madame A. is in the salon, seated next to the window” and, later, “*tableau: the grasses, the current – the wind*”;⁶⁹ and as he begins so he ends – “Fél. (her portrait) *She was lying flat . . . (like a recumbent Statue on a tomb)*.”⁷⁰ Visual images in Flaubert are not limited to creating decor. Certain of them, we shall see, generate plots of their own and demand to be interpreted by characters (who take on the role of beholders before paintings) as well as by readers. The attempt to decode these images can displace the drama of a traditional story and take on the force of an event.

Beyond painting scenes, visual imagery does three kinds of work for Flaubert. First, he associates painting with “impersonality.” To illustrate his argument that the writer must keep himself out of his art, the novelist sometimes resorts to the analogy of the painter. As he writes to Louise Colet, “literature will take on more and more the look of science; above all it will *exhibit*, which doesn’t mean be didactic. We must paint pictures. . . .”⁷¹

Second, Flaubert likes to subvert the habit of reading for the plot, and his lengthy *ekphrases* offer a means to suspend narrative progress. In the midst of composing *Bovary* he writes, “I now have fifty pages in a row without a single event,” and what stalls the plot is “an uninterrupted portrayal of bourgeois existence . . .” – running the risk of “painting in monotone without contrasts.”⁷² The practices of turning image into text and of delaying narrative work in concert.

Third, Flaubert borrows the language of painting to differentiate his fiction from that of the naturalists. This distinction might seem wrongheaded if we recall

Zola's highly visual if not cinematic prose. But Zola sets out to write a "natural and social history of a family under the Second Empire," and the graphic descriptions in the *Rougon-Macquart* simulate historical accuracy. On these grounds, in fact, Flaubert criticized Zola's lack of interest in "beauty."⁷³ But by imitating paintings instead of Second Empire events Flaubert is able to produce a second-degree representation, the representation of visual artifacts – *l'art sur l'art*.⁷⁴ In Flaubert's fiction (despite its "graphic" nature) the visual tends not to take on a photographic character, so that the reader may fail to visualize with any precision what Flaubert "describes."

Reviewing a book on Flaubert and painting, Julian Barnes observed that "literature began, for Flaubert, in that . . . crisp injunction, '*faire voir*.' But make us see what, and from which point of view, and in how much detail, and for what strategic purpose? To what extent is literature's seeing related to painting's seeing; are the visual arts an enemy, friend, or uneasy ally?"⁷⁵ These are the questions I address.

IV

Granting Manet and Flaubert their received foundational status in the history of modernism, how can we best approach them? Rather than canvas their entire careers I elected to narrow my field of vision, persuaded that the grand vistas of modernism can best be grasped by an exploration of salient details. (This book's most notable characteristic is its naggingly close readings: What happens if you just keep looking?) The objects I selected to study had therefore to serve two ends: First, they must possess high explanatory power, so that they function like Hegel's concrete universals or Blake's grains of sand in which you can see the world. Second, these objects must communicate across the image-text divide. One painting of Manet's and two tales of Flaubert supremely answered the purpose and so gave my study the shape of a triptych.⁷⁶ Manet's *Jeune dame en 1866* [*Young Lady in 1866*]⁷⁷ (1866) forms the central panel, as if this painting of a peignoiréd lady and parrot took the place of a Virgin and Child.⁷⁸ The flanking wings, opposed to each other but also made to fold over the central panel and interlock, are occupied by two of Flaubert's *Three Tales* [*Trois contes*], "The Legend of Saint Julien the Hospitaler [*La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*]," and "A Simple Heart [*Un Coeur simple*]" (1876–7).⁷⁹ These three works all bend their genres and achieve whatever "purity" they possess through pollution.

Because it is far from self-evident, the choice of the *Jeune dame* calls for some explanation. This work had an unpromising start. Its first critics panned it, and for five years it remained unsold. When the initial owner (a department store magnate) went bankrupt, he sold the *Jeune dame* for less than half of what he had paid. Nonetheless, the picture was a favorite of Manet himself. According to

Zola, the artist exhibited the *Jeune dame* privately in his studio “when the paint was hardly dry,”⁸⁰ and the next year included it in an independent retrospective he mounted. Then, in 1868, Manet singled it out for the highest privilege by selecting the *Jeune dame* for submission to the Salon – which he always regarded as the ultimate testing ground – and a more significant gesture still since he did not ordinarily submit works he had already exhibited, particularly not as recently as the previous year.⁸¹ For my purposes it is not inconsequential that the *Jeune dame* represents a parrot, speaking creature par excellence, because the bird’s presence already turns the *Jeune dame* into a “talking picture.” That association with language is reinforced by the painting’s complicated investment in narrative. It seems to have a story to tell (as we shall see). Furthermore, the *Jeune dame* is a strongly “intertextual” work because it engages in a “dialogue” with several other images, primarily *Olympia*: With the *Jeune dame* Manet returned for the first time to Victorine Meurent, the model for *Olympia*, and the painting was his first to enter the Salon after *Olympia*. Historians of modern art have not so much argued as assumed that *Olympia* is Manet’s supreme achievement. Yet his disruption of standard ways to represent women in that painting ought at least to make us wonder what Manet did next. Following the firestorm around *Olympia*, did he continue, curtail, or modify his ways? The *Jeune dame* offers a privileged answer, and retracing Manet’s strategy after the 1865 scandal casts light back on the earlier painting. Painted on the same sized canvas, with the same model sporting the same ribbon, it forms a vertical version of *Olympia*. I would argue that to understand *Olympia* itself requires that we consider the *Jeune dame*, because the later picture extends and complicates the oppositional work of the earlier one.

The *Jeune dame* is also a pivotal painting in Manet’s career. In the early 1860s, according to his most scrupulous historian, Michael Fried, Manet’s major canvases all referred to great examples of European painting from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century. Around 1865, however, Manet rather abruptly abandoned the practice,⁸² and the *Jeune dame*, I believe, is directly implicated in that decision. More than any other painting, it performs the shift from Manet’s citing old masters to his citing contemporary works, here a Courbet. In that respect we may regard it as a breakthrough painting.

As one of the handful of Manet’s works accepted by the Salon in the 1860s, the *Jeune dame* is also important for generating a substantial body of criticism, which will help situate the picture “in 1866.” Today the *Jeune dame* has become, as the *New Yorker* puts it, “an old Met favorite,”⁸³ but it does not follow that we see the work any better than its first beholders did. The picture’s reversal of fortune has produced next to no critical response; by contrast to the volumes written on *Olympia*, there is only a single article devoted to the *Jeune dame* – which appeared in the Metropolitan’s own house journal.⁸⁴ In fact, the terms of critical discussion have changed very little over time. We’ll see how reviewers in 1868 complained that the picture “doesn’t speak to us,” and from all appearances it

still doesn't. The difference is that we have absorbed the modernist lesson that avant-garde pictures aren't supposed to speak. Hence the Metropolitan's guide to its collection dispatches the picture, a little sniffily, as "attractive and inoffensive."⁸⁵ It will become clear why the *Jeune dame* is anything but, and how that characterization is itself evidence of resistance. To call the picture "inoffensive" denies (but also acknowledges) that the *Jeune dame* could mount some kind of offense, pose a threat, or commit some crime. Alternatively, critics have also neglected the *Jeune dame* because it looks disarmingly simple. That seeming simplicity is a ruse, and we shall further see how the *Jeune dame*, far from blandly lovable but empty, is a major and understudied work – paradoxical, pivotal, richly enigmatic, and elusive.⁸⁶

The importance of *Three Tales* in Flaubert's canon requires no parallel defense. From the start the work has been widely read and generated considerable criticism.⁸⁷ For now, it suffices to say that if Flaubert had not composed "Saint Julien," I would have needed to invent it, because that tale explicitly relates text to image. Until the very end, it reads like a standard (if bizarre) hagiography. So we learn about Julien's solitary childhood and cruelty to animals; his subsequent wanderings and military prowess; his marriage, parricide, and years of penance. Then, just when we think the narrative has concluded with Julien's ascent to heaven, Flaubert inserts a blank on the page followed by this startling postscript: "And that is the story of Saint Julien the Hospitaller, more or less as it is depicted on a stained-glass window in a church in my part of the world" (255).⁸⁸ Nothing we have just read was what it seemed, then; what for thirty pages we took in good faith for the narrative of a life turns out to be a single, swollen description of a window – in short, the verbal rendering of an image.

In a different way, "A Simple Heart" also turns on the reading of images. For the heroine, nothing exists, nothing is real until she can picture it, and Félicité pores over maps of Cuba and holy cards of the Paraclete. That tale claims a place in my triptych for another reason too, because like the *Jeune dame* it represents a woman and a parrot. (What could be better suited to this study than Flaubert's Loulou, a talking bird who is portrayed in Technicolor – "His body was green, the tips of his wings were pink, his poll blue, and his breast golden" – simultaneously visual and verbal?)⁸⁹ But a picture of a woman and parrot and a story about a woman and a parrot? That sounds like the dullest of coincidences, an attempt to capitalize on a purely contingent similarity, or thematic reading at its most vulgar.⁹⁰ Still, the very banality, the dumbness, what the French would call the *bêtise* of the comparison intrigued me: so superficial, so deaf to generic difference, so unpromising that something unexpected might result. Or at least, the *bêtise*, the brutal dumbness of the comparison resonates with a brutal aspect in both works.

* * *

What grand vistas does my study open up, then? What picture, what “legend” results from framing the *Jeune dame*, “Saint Julien,” and “A Simple Heart” as a triptych? Manet paints a deadpan portrait of a peignoiréd woman with a blank expression – an image that challenges the viewer by her pose, by her sporting a man’s monocle, and by the unexplained presence of a parrot by her side. What are we to read in this image? Flaubert writes tales of formal perfection with heated images in icy prose about a clockwork woman and a kinky saint. What are we to see when we read them? To us these works have come to signify cool formalist modernism; historicizing them will recall the difficulties they posed for their first beholders and readers, and reveal the ways that Manet and Flaubert moved beyond formalism.

Freed of the constraints imposed by studying literature and painting in isolation, I show how each artist poaches the other’s medium, intentionally or not, and therefore how Manet can “illustrate” Flaubert and how Flaubert can “articulate” or “give voice” to Manet. Flaubert supplies the right tone for Manet, as Manet provides the right look for Flaubert. For example, the writer’s deployment of clichés and ironic citation lets us view Manet’s paintings as Flaubertian pastiches of art history and Salon practice. Had the first critics of *Olympia* been good readers of *Madame Bovary* they might have looked at the picture differently and seen the way *Olympia* cites Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538) as a Flaubertian gesture. And Manet “illustrates” Flaubert by painting people who, the critics agreed, look disarmingly like objects in a still life – an effect Flaubert produces by calling the central character of “A Simple Heart” an automaton. In these stilled spaces Manet stages the sort of deadpan juxtapositions that Flaubert represents on mantelpieces or at agricultural fairs. In turn, Flaubert accounts for those seemingly unmotivated groupings of people or objects in Manet that drove critics to distraction, *Luncheon in the Studio* for one [see Fig. 28]. Likewise, the way that Flaubert frustrates expectations for a good read clarifies Manet’s habit of deforming narrative and flattening character. Exploiting the character of each other’s medium, Flaubert and Manet frustrate the bourgeois practice of “reading” for consumption.

V

An Overview. Because a point-by-point comparison between painter and writer risks jimmying the works into a single frame, I separate my readings of Flaubert and Manet. The challenge is to let them remain side by side without succumbing to the pressure to amalgamate. It is essential to respect Manet’s and Flaubert’s radical generic difference: A painting is not a text. That granted, my *gagueure* is to read one artist through the medium of the other, in a violent interpretive act. By approaching Manet and Flaubert each from the other side, I aim to reveal how one genre implicates the other, and how we can read Flaubert as an art critic

and Manet as a literary critic. Seeing and reading are separate, but they mutually engage in ways that are historically determined and structurally complex. Neither painting nor literature is one or self-identical or “pure”; they are bound up one with the other, each framing or informing its yin-yang mate, while never losing their differences. So while I separate my exposition, studying Manet first and then Flaubert, analytically the one medium is always informing my reading of the other. Before these analyses, though, come two chapters that treat the artists together.

Chapter 2 introduces my reading of Manet and Flaubert with a thick description of the cultural and historical period in which they moved, including a portrait of the year 1866 and a survey of prevailing aesthetics norms. Situating painter and writer in this context helps us understand such cultural anxieties of the period as ways women saw and were seen, or habits of bourgeois consumption. This description further locates the two artists in the context of decadent, fin de siècle sexuality. Chapter 3 canvases a certain “figure” that Manet and Flaubert share. I read this figure for its cultural and graphic meanings, to see what we can learn about ways of painting, writing, and reading – then and now. Chapters 4 and 5 decode the *Jeune dame*’s strategy through a historically grounded close reading of the woman and parrot. (In what ways, for example, did a parrot or a monocle signify in the 1860s?) This close reading prepares us to see the painting less as a portrait than as an allegory of beholding. Studying Manet’s *Jeune dame* will lead to impasses that Flaubert can address, and which I take up in Chapters 6 and 7. But there is no guarantee that Flaubert will “speak” Manet any better than Loulou, the tale’s parrot, would have. Flaubert will not so much resolve as reformulate the resistance we shall encounter in reading Manet.

Afterimages. What happens to art in the wake of our “fathers of modernism”? By way of a coda, I ask how our intense focus on the *Jeune dame*, “A Simple Heart,” and “Saint Julien” might torque the way we read the subsequent history of modernism in painting and literature. We shall draw connections between our triptych and fictions by Robbe-Grillet or Sartre and paintings by Ruscha or Pollock.

In short, the isolation of these two artists at this cultural moment – as well as the isolation not of images and texts but of figural practices common to Flaubert and Manet – contributes to a broader picture of the cultural imagination of modernism.

* * *

In terms of genre, my study itself is a displaced detective story, for both historical and methodological reasons. Poe invented this genre in the 1840s, with the Dupin trilogy.⁹¹ Baudelaire translated Poe, and Manet and Flaubert both

dipped into his translation.⁹² In fact, the year before he painted the *Jeune dame*, Manet was reading “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” the second of the trilogy.⁹³ And whether coincidentally or not, the *Jeune dame* repeats the strategy of “The Purloined Letter.”⁹⁴ As the map passage shows, Poe’s tale is about failing to see what is in front of you. Similarly, the evidence in the painting is hard to see not because it is concealed but because, as Dupin famously says, it is “a little bit too self-evident.” Like a good detective story, the painting even provides us with a lens to assist our examination, but it is open to question what we can see with her monocle. The Poe motif also points up the risk endemic to my study: By taking the detective’s glass to Manet and Flaubert, do I not take on the role of the police prefect, who by the intensity of his gaze overlooks what he so intently seeks?